

Carrie

The lobby of the Roark was less impressive the second morning, and Carrie hardly gave the lush greenery a passing thought as she walked through it, heading straight for the coffee shop. She got in line and checked her phone, noting that she had twenty minutes until her shift began. She would be better prepared today, and she hoped that her employer would be as well. If not, she'd just quit. She wasn't going to put up with any bullshit.

At the counter, she ordered her drink and stepped aside to wait. She watched the small team of employees move efficiently between stations, communicating with one another while focused on their simple tasks. Get a cup, fill it, mix it, seal it, move it, announce it. Why couldn't they be like that upstairs, she wondered?

Yesterday had been the worst first day at a new job that she could have imagined. She'd expected some hiccups here or there, given that it was a young startup in their first week of operation, but she hadn't considered a scenario in which *everything* went wrong. Appointments were double-booked, forms were misplaced, and no one seemed to understand the procedures. Today couldn't possibly be worse, could it? She shuddered.

Her name was called and she was handed her drink. "You like working here?" Carrie asked the smiling barista, glancing down to their nametag, EJ.

EJ laughed. "Like it?" They shrugged, "Not *really*..."

"But it's okay, right? Like, you don't spend all day thinking about quitting?"

EJ grinned, catching her drift. "Not yet. But we all get to that point eventually, don't we? Ask me again in a week." Then they moved on to the next person in line, and Carrie left to go find a table.

She settled on an empty two-seater by the exit, near a man she vaguely remembered speaking to yesterday during lunch. “Hey, Carrie,” he said, then held up a lanyard around his neck. “They haven’t given you one of these yet?”

She read his name and floor number, Brian on 27, and she smiled. “No, Brian. I don’t think my employer did much of anything right yesterday,” she said. He smiled back.

“And yet, here you are.”

“What can I say? I must either be a glutton for punishment, or it’s that I’ve got to eat. You’re welcome to believe whichever.” She smiled again. He chuckled.

As much as she desired a moment of uninterrupted peace to herself before facing another workday, she couldn’t trust that Brian wouldn’t bother her again, and it wasn’t worth her time to stick around and find out if he would. “Well,” she said, standing up to avoid further small talk, “off for round two.”

“Good luck.”

She stepped into the elevator with ten minutes to spare and made her way to the 31st floor. The door dinged, opened, and she stepped into the hallway, standing before the full-wall mural of a somber desertscape. She could hear voices inside the waiting room, which was peculiar at this hour. She walked the length of the mural to the employee entrance and knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” a woman called from the other side.

“It’s me, Carrie. I haven’t been given a keycard yet.”

The door unlocked, opened, and Whitney, the office manager, popped her head out to look down the hall. The elevator dinged, and she gasped. She yanked Carrie inside, quickly shutting and locking the door behind her.

Whitney studied her, scrunching her face up as she tried to remember her name. “Carrie?” she finally said, unsure of herself. Confused, Carrie nodded, and Whitney sighed with relief. “Wow. I’m pretty amazed I remembered that!” Carrie, not wanting to diminish the accomplishment by pointing out that she’d said her name only a moment ago, simply smiled.

But Whitney's expression soured. "Carrie, we have a problem."

"What's that?" Carrie asked, suddenly reminded of the waiting room, which shouldn't even be unlocked for another half-hour.

"Every appointment got moved to eight o'clock."

"But I thought we didn't offer eight o'clock appointments."

"We don't," said Whitney. "Like I said, we have a problem."

Still minutes from the start of her workday, Carrie had her first thoughts of quitting. "What are we supposed to do?" she asked.

"We need to tell them."

"You haven't even told them yet?"

"Well, no..." Whitney replied, her voice weakening. "I just figured that *you* should, seeing as how your position is more *client-oriented*..." She trailed off, her voice tapering to an acutely pitiful tone. She was desperate.

"Fine," Carrie sighed. She moped off to the back, put away her bag, finished her drink, and steeled her nerves to face the day. Whitney handed her a clipboard and Carrie stepped into the waiting room, promptly swarmed by patients, all angry and confused.

The patients all aired their problems at once as they gathered around, and Carrie found it difficult to focus. "My appointment got bumped up to eight o'clock," a large man complained, shoving his way to the front of the mob, "but so did Perry's, and Alan's, and George's, and—"

"Yes," Carrie interrupted. "There was a computer issue, and all the appointments were moved to eight."

"So, who gets the eight o'clock appointment?"

"Well, we don't actually *offer* an eight o'clock—"

"But we're all here," another person interjected.

"Shouldn't you squeeze one of us in to get the line moving?" Everyone nodded in agreement.

The consensus was that a grave injustice had been perpetrated, and the aggrieved parties felt entitled to compensation. Carrie found herself stuck in the middle, serving as a worthless shield for the inept pharmaceutical company that was ruining her life, and completely ineffectual at meeting any demands made of her. The patients cycled through their personal inconveniences:

“I’ve got other places to be.”

“I skipped breakfast for this.”

“I cancelled a meeting to be here.”

More people showed up, filed in, whined, addressed her by the wrong name, demanded preferential treatment, tried to bargain with her, bribe her, and so on. When she’d finally had enough, she whistled to quiet down the room, then announced the situation to get the newcomers up to speed. “There has been an issue with scheduling,” she explained. “*Everyone* was moved to eight o’clock.”

A disapproving murmur rippled through the crowd, and the patients argued among themselves, trying to work out their own system of privilege to determine a pecking order. Before it devolved into violence, Carrie whistled again.

“We’re not ready to take anyone right now,” she said. “We please ask that you just leave and return at your original appointment times.”

The murmur resumed, louder and angrier.

“Actually,” she added, “you should probably call first.”

At that, the crowd grew even more agitated, and they began shouting over one another to plead their case for priority service. Someone yanked the clipboard from her hand, then threw it to the floor to stomp on. Tears began to pool in the corners of her eyes as she knelt down to pick up it back up.

When she returned to her feet, she whistled once more. “I’m going to go get some answers,” she lied to the mob, choking back tears, then quickly excused herself from the room.

In the back, she hurled the clipboard to the ground at Whitney's feet. "Fuck this!" she snapped. "I can't do it again!" She shuffled into another room, grabbed her things, and stormed out through the employee exit, never so much as glancing at anyone on her way out.

She took the elevator back down to the lobby, using the time to recollect herself. The adrenaline wore off, her breathing steadied, and she was ready to reflect.

Ding.

She was on her way toward the lobby doors when she suddenly felt as though she wasn't ready to face the outside world just yet, so she sulked over to the coffee shop, which had quieted considerably.

"Back so soon?" EJ asked as she approached.

"Yeah," Carrie said, shamefully. She looked behind the counter, watching the employees clean up, chat, crack jokes, smile. "Say, are y'all hiring?"

"Sorry, no. We're all staffed up," EJ replied with a fake pout, then promptly shifted back to service-mode. "So, what can I get for you?"

It was a good question, but one that Carrie wasn't prepared for just yet. After all, she didn't know where her next paycheck was coming from. For all she knew, she was walking around with as much money as she could expect for the foreseeable future. What she needed was a job; one that didn't threaten her mental and physical health; one that could keep her sheltered, fed, clothed, with at least enough left over to afford a cup of coffee, maybe a nice dinner out every couple of weeks or so, takeout when she's feeling lazy—

"Do you need a minute?" EJ asked. "No rush."

She couldn't afford a cup of coffee right now; and she didn't really want one, even if she could afford it. What she needed was to go home, take a shower, and nap. Create some distance from her morning. Reset.

"Just go your own pace," EJ said, a distinct note of impatience creeping into their tone.

But what then, she wondered? Back to job boards and email correspondence? Cover letters and lying about experience? Form interviews and phone interviews and video interviews and live interviews and—

“Seriously, take your time. Stare vacantly at the menu for as long as you want.”

“Sorry,” Carrie finally said, returning from her thoughts and discovering that a line had formed behind her. “Nothing for me, thanks.”

EJ blinked, then craned their neck to look around her. “Next!”

Carrie takes place just minutes ahead of chapters 2-3 in [The Roark](#).